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Engaging Young Audience Research Colloquium

Australia Council for the Arts

Thursday 17 November 2011

More Than Just Audiences Panel

Presenter: Sandra Gattenhof

Sandra Gattenhof is Head of Drama and a senior lecturer in drama and contemporary performance in the Creative Industries Faculty, QUT. She is presently leading an Australia Council for the Arts/QPAC funded investigation into arts interventions for early childhood students in low socio-economic primary schools in Queensland. Sandra is a Drama Australia Board member in the role of Director of Arts Education and Industry Partnerships and is Drama Australia's representative on National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE). Her research monograph *Drivers of Change: Contemporary Australian Theatre for Young People* was published by Drama Australia in 2006.

For some audience members the art is secondary to engaging in a live and social experience. Research shows that the current generation - generation Z, millenials, generation next – are the most technologically enabled generation of young people ever to live on the planet – the digital natives. They have never known life without the web, social networking sites, online gaming and yet they are the most socially isolated and lonely generation ever. They are connected through Facebook, Twitter, Tweetdeck, Tumblr, Instagram and many other social networking sites as they share their life experiences with each other live, but in a virtual space. An article in the Sydney Morning Herald in June of this year titled *Generation Y so connected, but oh so lonely* reported that a national survey undertaken by Relationships Australia suggests 30 per cent of Australians aged 25 to 34 told the survey they were frequently lonely, far more than any other age group. The second loneliest were the young adults (18-25 years) - 19 per cent of them were frequently lonely. The survey, which polled 1204 young adults, highlighted connections between online life and loneliness. Social commentator Hugh Mackay has warned against a "new form of RSI - Reduced Social Interaction syndrome" caused by the lack of the "emotional nutrition" of spending time face to face with others. The desire for love, says Mackay, is the deepest of all our desires that when freely given offers the most enduring contribution to a better world. (Mackay 2010). One vital component of genuine loving community is that it must include space for people to spend unscheduled face-to-face time with each other.

This report is echoed in my own research in the area of contemporary theatre for young people. In my PhD study (Gattenhof 2004) is survey 40 performances for and by young people in 2001-2003. In the analysis of content explored in the performances 46% of the

productions explored issues around belonging, connectivity with people and conversely being disconnected from people and human relationships. From this evidence it could be argued that this issues social inclusion and connectedness weigh heavily on the conscious lives of young people.

So my question is – do the live performing arts have a role in developing social cohesion and wellbeing for generation Y and generation Z, our lonely generations?

Let's begin by positioning ourselves in the context of the National Cultural Policy Discussion Paper released by the Gillard government earlier this year for consultation. The document is broadly aspirational about the role the arts can and do play in the lives of Australians with emphasis in a number of sections about productivity advantage, economic outcomes and the role of the National Broadband Network. Early in the document four questions are posed to frame the discussion. One of the questions asks – "What impact do the arts and cultural heritage have on our society – on education outcomes and social cohesion?" (Australian Government 2011, 6). For this purpose of this discussion, I am interested is the second part of the question around the notion of social cohesion and in particular social cohesion for children and young people. The role of the arts as a contributor to society is activated in the document through "Goal 4: to increase and strengthen the capacity of the arts to contribute to our society and economy" (Australian Government 2011, p.17). Dig a bit deeper in this goal and there is a strong positioning of the arts in educational contexts that will most likely be animated in the implementation of the National Curriculum for primary and secondary schools in the Arts. One indicator for the achievement of Goal 4 is expressed as: "Arts and creativity are increasingly included in the mainstream of broader government priorities aimed at strengthening our society and economy" (Australian Government 2011, p.17). So where is the indicator around social cohesion? Turn to the last page of the Discussion Paper and you get two paragraphs titled "Social Impact: Education and Social Cohesion" (Australian Government 2011, p.23). The Discussion paper states: "In research undertaken by the Australia Council and Regional Arts Australia, there is also compelling evidence for the value of the arts and creativity in building resilience and identity in regional and indigenous communities". It goes onto say "the arts play a vital role in community wellbeing".

There are five parts to a robust sense of wellbeing in an individual and community – physical, psychological, economic, environment and social. As theatre and other live performing arts are a communal event, a shared event, then the social element is, I would argue, very strong. Live performance, as a social event, is of course not a new phenomenon. It goes back to ancient times, even prehistory when stories were shared around the fire and painted on cave walls. But given the research about this current generation and their experience of loneliness, perhaps it is time to turn our attention to how the performing arts and performance venues might ramp up the live and analogue experience to contribute to social cohesion and wellbeing. Indeed, how venues and companies wrap designed

interactions around the event – before and after – perhaps needs more attention than ever before.

So how should and can live performance venues respond to this challenge beyond just see young people as audiences of the future?

Let me share two recent examples from Brisbane this year.

World Theatre Festival with the cheeky acronym of WTF (take that to mean what you will) and 2High Festival.

WTF is held at Brisbane Powerhouse, a reclaimed industrial space that once generated power for a time when Brisbane had trams. It sits on a reach of the Brisbane River down the end of the fashionable suburb of New Farm. It is accessible by public transport but not right to the door, so it takes some planning to get there if you are not travelling by car, which quite a few young people don't. This event was not specifically programmed or targeted to the youth market. But it didn't exclude them either. As a report, now over ten years old, titled *Australia Council Framework for Youth and the Arts* identified that: "As consumers of art and culture, young people are as diverse as other sectors of the Australian community. They participate in popular, contemporary and traditional arts and culture, both eagerly and reluctantly, and anywhere in between" (1999; pp. 17-18). The festival hosted both local and international companies and artists. Whilst I won't make comment on the productions, I will make observations about the audience. It was full of young people, every night for the four days and nights I was there. And from talking to others this was the case throughout the ten days of the festival. The venue was buzzing with conversation and not just about the weather but robust conversation was had by young people around culture and the A-word ... the aesthetic. The festival took place two weeks before the commencement of the University year so I saw a lot of our Drama students there a number of times. When we all started the University year, I began one of my tutorials in Contemporary Theatre by discussing the festival and asked them why they were there. The answer was, it was social and it was a safe space to hang out. Oh, and the theatre was engaging too. Social and safe. The young people I talked too expressed that they felt welcome and included in the venue, knew what to wear (that is didn't have to negotiate a dress code) and that they could hang out with their friends and talk art. They loved the idea of going off to different performances and meeting up after to discuss which ones to see or not to see and then going to another show to repeat the process. They also loved the idea that they could turn up late afternoon and stay through until late evening.

Coincidentally, 2High Festival is also held at Brisbane Powerhouse. In fact it occurred three weekends ago. The festival is part of Backbone Youth Arts' program and like WTF is an annual event, curated by young emerging artists and producers. The Backbone website site describes the event as "Backbone 2high Festival is Australia's one-of-a-kind multi-arts experience for young emerging artists and cultural producers. Founded in 1993 by former

Backbone Youth Arts Artistic Director Susan Richer, the Backbone 2high Festival was originally developed to provide female arts administrators with hands on experience in the creative industries. In 2007, the Backbone 2high Festival evolved to welcome young men into the coordinator mix. Evolution is at the core of Backbone 2high Festival, and over 18 years the event has morphed into a heavily anticipated Festival and an unprecedented opportunity for young and emerging artists to showcase their talents” (Backbone Youth Arts 2011).

Interesting there is a manifesto on the 2High Festival web page that begins:

This is more than a festival.

This is a location, a place, a boundless experience – something to be felt and done.

Step in and be taken on a journey to discover no end.

Immerse in the feel of it, the sound of it, the spirit of it.

Already it smells social and experiential. Like WTF the venue was deck out in places to hang out. And people did both inside and outside the venue. Again the programming of multiple events in the venue made for great conversation as audience members came out of shows and moved into others. It was almost like listening to roving critics but all highly social and collegial.

This was a festival targeted to young people, young artists. But I witnessed a lot of not so young people at the event as well. Again the cross-pollination of social and age groups made for great conversation.

I have to say I left both events feeling like I was included, in a community and that my need to interact, and thereby satisfying the social fifth of the wellbeing model, made for a good day/night out.

What did both events get right – and perhaps contribute to the facilitation of social cohesion and wellbeing through live, face-to-face, real time interaction?

Both events didn’t actively market just to the youth and young adult sector. Or conversely to just to the youth sector as in the case of 2High. They didn’t look like a ghettoed events.

Both events were programmed in a venue that had plenty of space for conversations either brokered through forums or casual as people met up between shows and after a show. The venue had created spaces like mini-lounge rooms with beanbags and retro sofas to encourage conversation and to encourage people to stay.

Both events had the provision of food and drink that encouraged conviviality.

Both events programmed a large number of free performances and/or workshops alongside ticketed show. 2 High was in fact all free. This meant at WTF young people could pay for one show and then stay and see many others for free that encouraged audience members to hang around for longer than the average 'see the show and then go'.

Both events included work in progress showings and at WTF these were often followed by short feedback sessions with the artists, curated conversation and social inclusion.

Both events programmed high quality performance that was a mixture of traditional and innovative presentation modes.

Both events were programmed more like a music festival with performances occurring simultaneously in spaces within the venue and had multiple showings in the same day. This allowed for the navigation of a personalised experience based on interest, vibe or word of mouth.

Both events began mid to late afternoon and went into the evening, so if you wished you could come and go, or stay and play. Choice was important.

I believe young people crave the live experience because a good deal of their life is now played out online. Humans are social creatures and require human contact but the digital age has caused a seismic shift in how we experience life and engage with others. Both events privileged, if not curated, the social aspect of the festival. They thought about how best to facilitate real time, face to face interaction. They reduced possible RSI syndrome and positioned their punters as more than just an audience. Live performing arts and arts venues maybe able to provide a new platform for young people's social cohesion and wellbeing now and into the future.

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